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SUBJECT: RUSSIA LIMITS ELECTION OBSERVERS AGAIN

Classified By: DCM Daniel A. Russell for reasons 1.4(d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Following the same course it took in the December Duma elections, on January 28, the GOR issued a limited number of invitations to international organizations to observe the March 2 presidential election. Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Vladimir Churov specified that the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights could send 70 observers. The GOR made clear that accreditation and visa issuance would only allow observers to enter the country a few days before election day, thereby limiting the ability to conduct a pre-election assessment. CEC member Igor Borisov announced plans for an election day information center for journalists, observers and others. While the Russians are clearly making election observation difficult, our sense is that a limited, short-term ODIHR observer mission would be best able to shine an international spotlight on the deficiencies of the electoral process and do so in a way that presents a united US and European view. End summary.

A LIMITED NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS INVITED

¶2. (U) Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Churov announced January 28 that the GOR would invite 400 international observers to the March 2 presidential election. Among the organizations invited to send observers was the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which decided to sit out the December 2 Duma elections after the GOR limited the number of observers it would permit, placed restrictions on their activities, and delayed the issuance of visas. Churov specified that ODIHR would be permitted to send 70 observers. The Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE (OSCE PA) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) have been invited to send 30 observers each. Both organizations, along with the Nordic Council, sent parliamentarians to observe the Duma elections. Their joint assessment of those elections was that they "were not fair and failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections."

¶3. (U) Churov laid the responsibility for obtaining visas in a timely manner on the shoulders of the observers. He announced that accreditation forms were available on the CEC's web site and would be processed as soon as they were received by the CEC. Although Churov did not expressly say when observers could expect to receive their visas, at a subsequent press conference on January 29, CEC member Igor Borisov made it clear that international observers should not expect to be able to enter the country more than just a few

days before the election. ODIHR, which has not decided whether it will send observers, has noted the timing will not allow them to conduct a pre-election assessment. Explaining why observers would only be allowed to enter the country just days before election day, Borisov argued that most information observers need prior to the election can be found on-line.

¶4. (U) Borisov said international observers could visit any polling station and he stated the CEC's expectation that observer missions would use scientific methods in order to determine which polling stations would give them the best representative sample of the country. There are approximately 96,000 polling stations in the Russian Federation. When asked if observers could go to such areas as Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, which had near perfect turnout in the December elections, Borisov reiterated that there would be no restrictions and that their objective was to ensure maximum coverage of the country. He went on to note, however, that security of international observers would have to be ensured.

¶5. (U) Borisov said the CEC is open to suggestions on how to conduct better elections, specifically citing recommendations from a Japanese organization that observed the December elections which suggested more space be provided in polling stations and vote counting areas so that observers can better see what is taking place. Borisov emphasized the need for professional, competent and objective observers who follow scientific methods and act in accordance with the law when observing the March election. He argued that international observers have more privileges than domestic observers because they often have the opportunity to meet with candidates and political parties. He called the OSCE PA and PACE statement following the Duma elections prejudiced and

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without a scientific basis.

POLL SHOWS TRUST IN CEC; CEC PLANS INFORMATION CENTER

¶6. (U) Borisov said the CEC has learned through a recent poll conducted by VTsiom that Russians trust the CEC most when it comes to elections. Of the 1,600 respondents to a poll conducted in mid-January, 28 percent said they trust the CEC most for election information, 18 percent said they trust independent organizations, 7 percent trust sociologists, 6 percent trust political parties and a total of 4 percent said they trust the OSCE, UN or the Commonwealth of Independent States. With these poll results in mind, Borisov announced the CEC would provide additional means for disseminating information during the March election by establishing an information center in the State History Museum adjacent to Red Square. The ground floor will be set up as a center for mass media where journalists, observers and others can access the Internet, and conduct press conferences and roundtable discussions. An election hotline will also be established.

¶7. (U) Borisov predicted voter turnout at around 60 percent in the March election. Turnout in the December Duma elections was 63 percent.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) The GOR has repeated its December conditions for election observation, by placing equally restrictive conditions on the numbers and period of accreditation. While we can understand ODIHR's principled calculation in not playing Russia's game, we believe on balance that ODIHR, as one of the world's preeminent election monitoring organizations, remains in the best position to deliver a professional, impartial assessment of Russia's presidential

election. A small, short-term ODIHR mission could generate a thorough assessment of the elections -- and the registration process and campaign shortfalls that served to limit political competition -- as well as to highlight Russia's unprecedented restrictions on the ability of international observers to do their work. While a blunt PACE/OSCE PA assessment would be helpful, a more professional report by ODIHR -- with its expertise and standing -- would carry greater weight inside Russia and abroad, and show US and European solidarity.

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